

A Message from the Editor

Contesting: A Cooperative Game

Is contesting a sport? That question is asked from time to time, with different answers depending on your point of view. Perhaps it is best understood as a game, a pleasant pastime that rewards whatever level of effort you choose to put into it. It's a game with different rules and different equipment, and we all show up to play from time to time for different reasons.

But in at least one important sense, contesting is different from most other games. WØYK made this observation when he accepted his CQ Contest Hall of Fame award at Dayton a few years ago. What we actually do to earn points during contests requires the active cooperation of our competitors — completing efficient, accurate, and numerous contacts. When you come across your arch competitors on the bands and give them a contact, you are adding to their score, just as they are to yours.

It goes further than that. We cooperate on the bands as well. It starts with having a clean signal and following good operating practices: Listening before transmitting. Responding when a station comes back to your call. Waiting your turn when the station comes back to someone else.

We all come from different families, with a variety of upbringings. We also come from various countries with diverse cultures and ways of cooperating. Go to another country and watch how they queue for everything, from movies to airlines. It is distinctly different. Rules of cooperation are literally all over the map, with cutting in line practically a capital offense in some and simply expected behavior in others. Airliners board pretty quickly in Asia, not so fast here in the States.

The K1N Experience

It was exactly this thought that ran through my mind as I read some of the post-mortem reports on the latest high-profile DXpeditions. Specifically I was looking at the data on QSOs by continent and the comments posted by K1N operator WØGJ. The bottom line of Glenn's discussion is that, even though the Navassa operation spent slightly more time working Europe than North America, the mix of contacts was overwhelmingly tilted toward North America — 58 percent to 32 percent. This was because QSO rates working North America were about twice as high as those for Europe.

So, what's a DXpedition discussion doing in a contest publication? In case you haven't noticed, the modern DXpedition — particularly those on the scale of K1N — has become contests of sorts. It's now much more than just getting a new DXCC entity. It's about knock-

ing off the travelers on as many bands and modes as possible, working your way up the leader board. On the DX side, the operators are always cognizant of how their contact totals rack up against those of other groups, both in total and across regions of the world. In short, they are contests in and of themselves, and contest skills and techniques certainly apply to them.

The K1N statistics are pretty cut and dried. The rates were lower to Europe than to North America. Why? Not propagation, according to WØGJ. Navassa had better paths to Europe than to the western half of North America. His conclusion points squarely at European operating techniques — too much non-stop calling, excessive transmitting, poor signal quality, not listening, and so forth. I would suggest that there are plenty of North American folks who exhibit many of those operating shortcomings and more. What Glenn is saying, with numbers that appear to support his position, is that these unproductive and, indeed, uncooperative operating techniques are more prevalent in Europe than in North America.

Many of my European friends would beg to differ. The problem, they say, was that many of the K1N operators were ineffective pileup managers. Too many long periods of listening with no signal presence, too much rewarding of bad behavior, resulting in loss of discipline and control. Bad rate, it is said, begets bad rate, as callers become frustrated.

Back to Contesting

Finger-pointing discussions are never pretty, but if we listen to all sides of this discussion, there are some important lessons for testers. People do operate differently, broadly speaking, across countries and continents. As a run station, customizing and tailoring your operating techniques to suit different parts of the world — where different habits and different cultural approaches to cooperation prevail — is absolutely vital.

It's hard to learn all the lessons you need to know, especially if you operate from different parts of the world yourself. There can be no pileup discipline, though, if you're not loud enough to be heard. One of my contesting heroes, N6AA, estimates that if you operate from a DX location with a signal that is S-7 or less to a high-rate area, your control over your pileup will suffer.

So, let's say that you are loud, you've got a good opening, and the potential for good rate is there. What things would you do differently if, for example, you are working Europe instead of Japan?

From my experience, European ops send faster CW than those in Japan. They have shorter call signs and are much more aggressive, so the technique is slightly different. My keyer speed goes up, especially in the beginning of the contest. Coming back to a partial call sign is almost useless. If you send UA3XX? 599 04, you will likely get the same pileup calling you as before. But if you send UA3XXX 599 04, they will all stand by, and you will put the contact in the log.

Operators in Japan tend to send more slowly and have longer call signs. That's mostly bad for rate, with one distinct caveat. Longer call signs make the Super Check Partial feature of most contest loggers much more effective. If you have everything but one letter of a JA call sign, the chances are that your software will suggest the right call sign. By contrast, there is almost always more than one match for, say, a 2 × 1 call sign such as UT7 or HG1. And you *do* use Super Check Partial, don't you?

Japanese operators are also more orderly and polite — at least in pileups over non-rare W stations. They are likely to simply not respond if you get their call signs wrong, while North American stations will almost always come back with a correction. Having a full contest exchange answered with only hiss, necessitating a full restart, is a rate killer.

Cooperation is Beautiful

Cooperation is always a work in progress. In the language of economics, my native tongue, sadly, there are too many incentives to do the opposite. If everyone else is polite and attentive in pileups, or if everyone else has clean signals, then I will do well by being a boor with splatter and clicks. But if cooperation breaks down, and everyone is like me, then we have chaos, and no one wins.

Peer pressure to rein in uncooperative behavior on the bands is great, and we could always use more of it. But, I think contest adjudicators can have an important role. The CW World Wide contests created quite a stir when they added "excessive bandwidth" of transmitted signals to their list of unsportsmanlike conduct. Without opening the whole can of worms over how it is defined or enforced, though, I think that it has had a useful impact on behavior. I think you can say the same thing about the CQ WW rules requiring running stations to identify in "a timely manner."

Another way we cooperate, of course, is by sharing tips and information, and that's exactly what we try to do with *NCJ*. Do you have any to share? Please let me know.